DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 842 CS 501 632

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TITLE Designing the Speech Communication Classroom: A Viable Alternative.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 12p.; Study prepared at New Mexico State University

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Arrangement; *Classroom Environment; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Educational Philosophy; Evaluation Methods; *Existentialism; Instructional Aids; *Speech Communication; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a structure for the speech communication classroom, based on a philosophically existential approach to education. The following suggestions are offered to those considering such an approach. There should be movable furniture, enabling students to move about and to turn toward one another so that they can be physically in position to interact with one another. It is essential that the students decide whether to group according to intellectual preference. The instructor's concern should be primarily with developing the student as communicator and not merely with memorization of facts. The instructor should get the students to engage in some real life situation by means of a project. Existentialists believe that the book is the best aid to the student; however, the laboratory is a useful teaching device, and field projects are also helpful. The rules and penalties established in a classroom should be a reflection of the norms generated by both students and teacher. Three criteria are suggested for evaluation purposes: students' self-reports, students' evaluations of each other, and the teacher's evaluations of the students' growth in class. (JL)

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DESIGNING THE SPEECH COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE

by

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Speech communication educators have long been concerned with attempting to utilize effective teaching strategies. There is considerable concern with finding a strategy which will enable us an opportunity to teach students concepts, principles, and skills of communication while simultaneously maximizing student learning. Learning refers to the student achieving specific objectives. These objectives may be in the cognitive, affective, or motor skill realm.

When selecting a teaching methodology, the educator should attempt to establish a system of teaching priorities. For instance, one instructor may opt to utilize a lecture method of instruction in the classroom. The focus here is on the student being able to recall factual material on an examination. The emphasis being placed on the achievement of cognitive objectives.

On the other hand suppose another instructor chooses to use an experiential mode of instruction (i.e., laboratory activities). Here the focus would be on developing interpersonal communication skills. The emphasis is on affective and motor skill development regardless of the methodology employed. the educator should stress specific learning objectives (i.e., cognitive, affective, motor).

In conjunction with the selection of specific learning objectives, the teacher maintains a particular orientation and philosophy of education. An individual's philosophy of education should be reflected in the system of objectives and teaching methodology utilized. For maximum learning to occur, there should be continuity among one's philosophy of education, educational objectives, goals, and teaching methodology.

In our quest to achieve optimum learning, we must review the great-many teaching philosophies and methodologies available to speech communication educators. The focus of this investigation attempts to offer a potential philosophy and device to teach speech communication. More specifically, it involves a presentation of an existential philosophy of education, its tenets applied to the speech communication classroom.

Philosophy

One primary advocate of an existential teaching philosophy is Van Cleve Morris who focuses primarily on the teaching of young children. However, the educational philosophy of Morris is not restricted to the education of young children. There are a variety of applications and implications to the teaching of speech communication at the college and university level. Very generally, Morris' philosophy is attempting:

(1) to bring the learner's self-determination to the center of the learning process;

(2) to awaken in the learner existential awareness of himself/herself as a single subjectivity present in the world.

(3) to expose the learner to the education of private awareness and personal involvement.[1]

If we consider the complexity of our communication environment and the mechanistic nature of our society one realizes rather quickly, that there exists a need at any age for students to be re-educated in becoming more acutely aware of one's own existence. Presently, with the advent of a technocratic society, man has the potential to emerge as a mechanistic creature devoid of any acute sensitivities that contributes

to man's uniqueness in the animal kingdom. Perhaps what is needed to prevent this fatal condition of man, is to foster the principles of an existential philosophy in the educational system at any level. While speech communication educators cannot remedy all of the potential flaws in our society we can adopt such a strategy in the speech communication classroom.

Implicit in an existential philosophy of education is a sense of responsibility accompanied by the freedom of choice. Morris suggests: "Let learning be the sharp and vivid awakening of the learner to the sense of being personally answerable for his own life."[2]

This philosophical stand can be applied to the speech communication classroom. In our classroom the learner is usually presented with concepts and principles concerning speech communication. The learner is exposed to various moles of anlyzing communication situations. If the learner chooses to assimilate the new information into his/her cognitive or affective development, he/she must assume responsibility for its future application and utility. The educator cannot be required nor expected to coerce the student into internalizing the material. What the instructor can do is provide the student with a variety of avenues of thought regarding communication strategies and behaviors. This strategy should increase a student's free will. Consequently, the student can decide exactly what is useful and what is useless to him/her as a communicator.

The individual can then be capable of exploring alternative strategies of communication and employ new communication behaviors. A new level

of communication sensitivity is the overall objective. An existential philosophy advocates that ideas are little or nothing apart from existence, apart from lived experience. Consequently, the ideas expressed by communication educators should be meaningful to a student's existence, if an individual chooses to accept them.

Fortunately, in speech communication, course content can be applicable to each student's daily experience. Educators in communication should take full advantage of this luxury and employ an existential teaching methodology which relates a student's existence to any new information professed in the classroom. Hopefully, our students can experience meaningful interaction with the course content in our speech communication classrooms.

The Speech Communication Classroom

While the existential philosophy advocates many abstract assumptions regarding the world, it must be able to return to more realistic grounds. A philosophy is only as good as its application and practical utility. In this case, there must be practical utility for the speech communication educator. In designing the speech communication classroom, one needs to consider a host of crucial variables. The following represents some suggestions as to what the speech communication classroom might look for when employing an existential educational approach.[3]

Seating Arrangement: There should be movable furniture. This represents a feeling of change. Chairs that can be arranged and rearranged in an infinity of patterns suggests a fluidity in the reality

of the classroom. Individuals learn much from one another; they learn in group problem-solving situations, they learn in cooperative situations independently of the instructor. They need seats that will allow them to turn toward one another so that they can physically be in position to interact with one another.

Heterogeneous vs. Homogeneous Groups: The existential philosophy is committed to the notion of "freedom of choice." Therefore, it is essential that the student makes the distinction whether to segregate on intellectual preference. There is nothing wrong with recognizing that some individuals learn faster than others.

Information: The subject matter of speech communication would reflect Morris' suggestions that; most certainly the existentialist would be the last of all our philosophers to be caught saying 'I teach history' or 'I teach speech.' He is too committed to the subject of the existential individual (man as subject, not object) to have too much concern for the subject matter of some presumed objective existential world outside.[4] Our concern should be primarily with developing the student as a communicator and not merely with memorization of facts.

Teaching Techniques: Existentialists would suggest that the instructor get the students to put their hands and minds directly into some real life situation by means of a project. By utilizing this technique, the teacher can foster more genuine learning than any other mode of teaching (i.e., lecture, demonstration, recitation).

The speech communication educator might, for example, have the students go out into the real world and analyze small group communication

(leadership, problem-solving, nonverbal behaviors). For instance, the instructor might have students analyze advertising or political campaigns in terms of communication strategies.

Furthermore, much of what is done in terms of inductive classroom activities serves a valuable function. The students have an opportunity to experience many of the communication concepts and principles in simulated classroom activities (they are often as real as outside communication situations).

Teaching Aids: Existentialists propose that the book is the most superior aid to the student. It is valuable because the student can go over and over the material. A book is the basic aid to teaching. However, the blackboard stands as the greatest visual aid next to the book and is highly useful to the instructor. The instructor can for example, place a communication model on the blackboard and explain it to the class. Then the students can go up to the board and modify the model if they choose. The blackboard provides a visual as well as a flexible teaching aid.

The laboratory is another useful teaching device. It is considered a natural extension of the demonstration. The learner begins to handle things on his own. He is able to practice the utilization of communication concepts and principles. The laboratory is a place where the students engage in classroom activities. This can be the actual classroom assigned for teaching or some other room which might be considered more conducive to laboratory assignments.

Field projects are another educational aid. It is one step removed from the laboratory because it is the whole world of sensory experience outside the classroom. The major objective for a field project would be to trigger new questions in the learner's mind. Speech communication educators might want to take their classes into a courtroom and have the students discover the techniques utilized by lawyers, witnesses, and criminals. Or perhaps take the students to a bar and observe nonverbal communication behaviors associated with quasi-courtship situations.

Rules and Penalties: Existentialists would operate from a position that rules would come from an authority within and intrinsic to the life of the individual (e.g. the individual himself, peers in the classroom). The rules and penalties established in a classroom would be a reflection of the norms generated by both students and teacher.

Evaluation: This concern is best explicated by Morris when he suggests that, "the existentialists, quite understandably, have not thought much about testing. Testing always refers to some standard outside the learner. If an individual has been brought to question the meaning of life; if he thinks for the first time that the world is all for and what man is in it for; and if, especially, he has become seriously interested in what he is to make of his own life above and beyond his prospective career-then we might say that the existentialist student has learned well."[7]

While the existentialists have not considered the notion of testing, it still remains a necessary activity. It is suggested that the evaluation of student performance be measured as follows: (1) students self report

(i.e., position paper) of what he learned concerning communication concepts and principles. If he applied them to his own communication behavior, and has his communication become more effective as a result of this new information concerning communication. (2) students evaluate each other on a variety of dimensions (i.e. cooperativeness, liking, openess, friendliness), and (3) teacher evaluation of growth in the class (attendance, cooperativeness, improved communication, effectiveness in participation of classroom activities). These three criteria should constitute student evaluation. This way everybody is involved in the evaluation of each other.

Conclusions

A structure of the speech communication classroom has been presented. While this plan is by no means comprehensive, it provides some potential direction for designing the speech communication classroom based on an existential philosophical approach to education. The educator is encouraged to modify these suggestions to fit his/her own style of teaching.

While many of the underlying concepts of an existential approach seem radical and somewhat new, the existentialists must not be seen as merely "anti-intellectuals" or a threat to communication as a social science or academic discipline. Rather, the existentialists emphasize the importance of decision-making in everyday existence, challenging us to adopt our teaching, research, and criticism to provide for man's individual and social communication needs. Kierkegaad emphasizes an extremely significant point when he argues: "...it is... a miserable mode of

existence for a thinker who is also an existing individual to lose imagination and feeling, which is quite as bad as losing his reason."[5]

Footnotes

1. Van Cleve Morris, Philosophy and the American School, (Boston, Mass., 1976, pp. 389-394

2. Van Cleve Morris, Existentialism In Education, (New York, 1966), p. 117

3. Morris, op. cit., p. 415

4. Morris, Ibid., p. 432

5. For a more detailed explanation of Kierkegard's philosophy see David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Kierkegard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript, (Princeton, N.J., 1960), p. 311